

Executive Summary

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Refugees and Their Protection in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe

The current COVID-19 pandemic affects all people worldwide but those in particularly vulnerable positions, including refugees and displaced people, may be exposed to greater risks. In a recent study, we explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected refugees and refugee protection in six countries in West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa, namely Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe, during the first year of the pandemic up to and including February 2021. Using a non-representative questionnaire, we seek to gain insights into the perspectives of persons of refugee background, scholars, government officials and aid actors working with and for refugees. A total of 90 respondents filled in the questionnaire.

From the responses, it is evident that the situation in which refugees and displaced people find themselves in host countries was already challenging prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 has amplified these challenges, partly also creating new risks. **Participants stressed that economic hardship, limited livelihoods, insufficient access to services, health and security risks are among the major challenges** unfolding due to the pandemic.

Although developments in states and the states' responses to the pandemic varied, participants address similar effects. **State actions such as border closures or the imposition of lockdowns came with severe impacts on refugees and asylum seekers**, leaving them stranded, making it difficult for them to access health and other services or to move for income-seeking purposes.

Humanitarian actors adapted a number of their responses to satisfy immediate needs, but pandemic-related developments such as increased digitisation partly also hindered refugees' and asylum seekers' access to services.

The results indicate that despite the varying challenges they are confronted with, **refugees themselves and their refugee-led organisations play an active role in pandemic responses**. They act as communicators of risks associated with COVID-19, as educators on hygiene and safety measures and as providers of material resources such as face masks or soap as well as psycho-social support.

On a broader, societal level, the data indicates that **the pandemic has partly reinforced tensions amongst refugees and between refugees and host communities**, primarily concerning access to resources. Moreover, refugees are confronted with xenophobic attitudes in a number of countries as they are blamed for bringing the virus. Nevertheless, respondents also highlight **practices carried out by refugees and aid agencies in times of the pandemic to mitigate tensions and contribute to peaceful conditions**.

This qualitative study thus shows not only the complex effects of the pandemic but also the various national and local practices to deal with the pandemic. The findings indicate that **COVID-19 responses at all levels must consider vulnerable groups**, including refugees and asylum seekers, to take adequate care of their needs and ensure their protection.

The study was conducted as part of the research projects “Forced Migration, Women – and Peace? Peacebuilding practices of women in refugee camps” ([DSF](#) and [Osnabrück University](#)) and “Forced Displacement in Africa: The politics and stakeholders of migration governance” ([DSF](#) and [Arnold Bergstraesser Institute](#)). The projects are independently funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF). Due to the pandemic, the respective principal investigators of the projects decided to cooperate and jointly study in comparative perspective the effects of the pandemic on refugees and refugee protection.

Nadine Segadlo, Ulrike Krause, Franzisca Zanker, Hannah Edler

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